

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF RELIGION
AND
SOME OBSERVATIONS ON CLIFFORD GEERTZ

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Résumé

Ce travail s'insère dans le cadre général de l'anthropologie de la religion. Après un survol rapide de la tradition durkheimienne, les auteurs examinent quelques contributions de l'approche interprétative de Clifford Geertz à l'étude des significations des phénomènes religieux.

Resumo

Este artigo insere-se no quadro geral da antropologia da religião. Em primeiro lugar, os autores passam em revista a tradição clássica de Émile Durkheim para examinar, em seguida, algumas contribuições da antropologia interpretativa de Clifford Geertz para a análise dos fenômenos religiosos.

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«A religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic».

(GEERTZ 1966:4)

Social scientific approaches to the study of religious phenomena have a long history and each generation of scholars has to some extent built upon as well as reacted against the work of their predecessors. This paper will briefly examine the work of Clifford Geertz against the backdrop context of the Durkheimian functionalist tradition long dominant in the field.

The structural-functional approach associated with the work of Emile Durkheim and his followers has been arguably the most influential perspective on religion for most of this century. Durkheim's definition, according to which

«A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden — beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them» (DURKHEIM 1965:62).

is the hallmark example of a *functional* definition of religion. In this type of definition, religion is defined by what it *does*. These definitions are often contrasted to *substantive* definitions, which attempt to define what religion *is*.

The choice between a functional and a substantive definition is a matter of strategy. The main advantage of a functional definition strategy is its breadth: it encourages researchers to be sensitive to the religious character of a whole range of social settings. A disadvantage of a functionalist definition is

that it implies that society has certain functional requisites, some of which are uniquely fulfilled by religion (McGuire 1981:8). We shall return to this important point shortly.

In the Durkheimian perspective, religion is made up of beliefs and rituals, and the two are connected (cf. Collin 1982: chapter 2). The basic religious belief is the dualism of and opposition between the sacred and the profane. The sacred is dangerous, ominous, awe-inspiring, and supremely important. The profane includes just about everything else: profane things can be dealt with matter-of-factly and routinely without any special preparation and whatever one's mood. Rituals are «procedures by which people must conduct themselves in the presence of things that they believe to be sacred» (Collins 1982:34). In similar fashion, the opposite of these two are also related: non-ritual behavior is that which is appropriate in the presence of the profane. To Durkheim, the rituals of assembled social groups reinforce the sacred character of the group itself.

The Durkheimian approach to religion, as developed in the work of Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and other scholars, has been subjected to a wide range of criticism in the past few decades. For example, in an influential symposium held in the 1960's and devoted to anthropological treatments of religion (Symposium 1963), it was evident a fair number of contemporary scholars were at the very least dissatisfied with the work of their immediate predecessors. A notable body of opinion came out in favor of a re-channeling of energies from the accepted sociofunctional mode of analysis to a study of religion in itself, as a prerequisite to examining its role in society. Primitive belief and practice, for so long construed almost a priori as nurturing group solidarity, were badly in need of attention in their own right. The criticism was forcefully advanced that the kind of synchronic functionalism that had become popular was in fact often mired in tautology and simplistic truisms (e.g. society requires cultural integration, religion is what provides cultural integration, therefore religion

is a requisite for society's existence; cf. McGuire 1982:8). The view became widespread that synchronic functionalism deserved a «rethinking», not only with respect to religious phenomena but in the study of other areas of social life as well.

The traditional structural/functional mode of analysis which has come to be associated with the work of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, postulated that society can be treated as an *organism* with certain basic *needs*, and that certain institutions fulfill identifiable *functions* in the operation of the organic whole. In addition to the problem of circularity or tautology just mentioned, two further deficiencies of the traditional structural/functional mode of analysis may be cited in respect to religious interpretations. Generally speaking, many scholars have argued that such an approach is incapable of dealing with change and the possible social and individual disharmonies that come with it. More specifically, in many functionalist analyses the meaning of primitive belief and practice was sacrificed, either to the domain of psychology or as irrelevant to the delineation of social functions. The difficulties of handling change were of course mitigated by the type of system studied. As long as field research remained tied to the concept of the small-scale, homogeneous community the latent inflexibility of the structural/functional method remained disguised.

An important point is that «function» is only to be maintained by virtue of religious belief on the individual plane. A latent function, by definition, is not intended by the actor. Thus, and particularly on a social basis, functional religion cannot in any way account for or explain continued adherence to beliefs on the part of individuals. To try to maintain such a viewpoint is to substitute effects for causes. To explain the role of religion in society is not therefore to explain religion but to explain society. And such was the substance of Durkheim's thesis: God represents society. Religious symbols mobilize and concretize sentiments and values of social solidarity. Durkheim's ultimate position exemplified in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* has been criticized because of its

apparent circularity: the postulated autonomous moral force of the social is ultimately traced back to the very sentiments it was believed to inspire. Yet in a sense, this circularity is only empirical, and not logical: it occurs whenever there is a process of feedback at work. Collectively enacted rituals reinforce sentiments of social solidarity, which in turn reinforce the belief in the sacred, and so on. This dynamic feedback process has been hidden from view in many traditional analyses, and is brought into the foreground in the works of Geertz, as we shall see shortly.

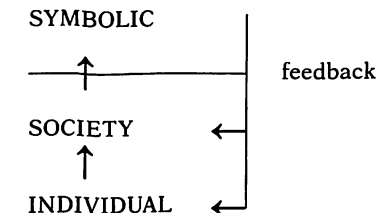
The selection of symbols is a topic which Durkheim largely left unanswered. It would seem that the religious nature of the symbol, its sacred segregation from the profane world, is an arbitrary imposition of the collective conscience. The actual mechanics of this bestowal were never documented by the Durkheim school. Later on other authors, attempting to substantiate his thesis, proposed somewhat more conclusive criteria. Radcliffe-Brown deemed a symbol sacred because it was first of all useful to society. Retaining Durkheim's field of inquiry — totemism — we can note Lévi-Strauss's declaration, that is to say that totems are excellent fodder for thought. Fortes, largely on the basis of Tallensi totemism saw totems as enmeshed in the syndrome of jural rights that characterized the lineage as a corporate group. Although Lévi-Strauss's proposal could, and does, have a societal aspect, it more deeply reflects the analogical and sensible mode of ordering the world which Lévi-Strauss sees as the way of being of primary thought. While «intellectualizing» what in Durkheim ultimately became a recourse to sentiments, Lévi-Strauss's anthropology is a formal presentation of symbolic systems which, with Durkheim, cannot differentiate them in value terms, and avoids, as against Durkheim, the complexities of their sacred isolation by subsuming symbols in a general theory of mind. The focal significance of religious symbolism for any approach which assigns equal weight to social, cultural and individual variables is dealt with by Clifford Geertz in a number of studies of

Javanese society. In coming to grips with the flaws of static functionalism Geertz provides both more adequate methodology («dynamic» functionalism), and a more comprehensive perspective to anthropological approaches to religion.

Geertz's definition of religion, with which we began this paper, shares with Durkheim's definition a common membership in that large family of functional approaches to defining religion. Geertz is, however, much more specific about the dynamic mechanism involved in the creation of meaning for individuals on the one hand, and the creation of social solidarity in a group, on the other. For Geertz, religion is man's mode of expressing the fundamental nature of reality. He differentiates between the moral-aesthetic aspects of culture —designated as «ethos»— and the cognitive-existential elements for which he reserves the term «world view». Religion supplies the conceptual bond between these two perspectives, synthesized in sacred symbols. «Religious symbols», says Geertz, «formulate a basic congruence between a particular style of life and a specific metaphysic, and in so doing sustain each with the borrowed authority of the other» (Geertz 1966).

This dialectic of the ideal and the actual is a theoretical ramification of Geertz's general insistence upon the dynamic interrelationship between the cultural and the social. «Culture», as an «historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols», supplies both a basis and a source of interpretation for organized behavior patterns, which for our purposes here, can be considered «social structure». Culture, and therefore religion, is thus primarily a symbolic system. Following Sorokin, Geertz distinguishes between «causal-functional» integration and «logico-meaningful» integration. Whereas the former reflects the state of society on the ground —Durkheim's social morphology— and can be adequately studied in structural-functional terms, the latter concept signifies the cultural dimension of the *is* and its meaningful justification in ethical and cognitive terms. The logico-meaningful plane is

symbolic and its meanings feedback into the social structure and personality structure in a continuum.



That disharmonies and dysfunctions can ensue from religious beliefs and practices is particularly evident in situations when the cultural and social planes, ideally interdependent, become independent and often conflicting. Geertz illustrates this in his account of the disruption he observed at a funeral ceremony in urban Java (Geertz 1957). In this kind of situation the normative, rather than validating behavior, tends to undermine it. Leaving change aside, let us examine Geertz's conceptualization of sacred symbols. The latter, as already suggested, fuse facticity with value in a meaningful synthesis. There are, Geertz believes, (and his evidence does indicate quite some support for this), a limited number of such synthesizing symbols in any culture.

For Geertz, religion is made up of this «cluster» of sacred symbols which constitutes the Javanese «Weltanschauung». Adherence to the meaning embodied in the symbol complex is a criterion of social acceptability. Quoting Geertz: «In Java, small children, simpletons, boors, the insane, and the flagrantly immoral are all said to be not yet Javanese and not yet human» (GEERTZ 1970:277).

Javanese religion is rendered even more relevant to a study of sacred symbols by the simultaneous presence of Hindu/Buddhist, islamic and traditional animistic belief systems. Each has its own symbolic cluster with functions to

sustain differing marriages of ethos and world-view within the overall context of Indonesian culture. As far as these variants co-exist in specific spatial and social contexts, there is little conflict between them. In fact, one discerns beneath the dissimilarities an overriding sense of a common culture. Most prominent here is a general emphasis on a «phenomenology of feeling», «slamet». Everyone in life seeks «slamet» — well being. The «slametan» as a basic core ritual, despite its differing symbolic efficacy in pagan, Islamic and Hindu/Buddhist contexts, runs the whole gamut of Javanese society. It may, in its general stress on commensality of men and the spirit world, constitute the most elemental of religious symbols of the entire human kind.

The cooperative ethic of the «slametan» is, however, endowed with mystical validification and is coterminous with the intent of attaining «slamet» — that peculiarly negative disengagement from the affairs and tribulations of a this-worldly existence.

If the principal function of ritual is said to be the contribution it makes to the maintenance of social structure, anthropology can set aside what Nadel has called those «concerns» and «capacities» of religious systems which are geared to the belief that life *is* comprehensible. At least in the sense of there being somewhere «another world to live in ... whether we expect ever to pass wholly over into it» (Santayana) which gives a revelation to life and makes it what we call as «liveable». As has been made clear, Geertz does not deny the possible sociofunctional role of religion. Indeed, his definition of religion falls squarely in the broad functionalist tradition. Rather he viewed the emphasis on the social dimension in many traditional analyses to be inadequate and incomplete. The most important feature of religion, for Geertz, is its role in providing an integrated meaning system for individuals and for society as a whole.

Religion itself can be abstract and practical simultaneously, as is understandable when we take in consideration the Java-

nese concept of «rasa». The latter in addition to being a concept of truth, beauty and goodness, is also a preferred mode of experiencing, a kind of affectless detachment. The question in a cross-cultural framework is how far men's ultimate visions influence their everyday behavior. The answer is to be looked for in the confluence of culture and social organization and can be determined only by first making exhaustive analyses of ultimate meaning systems; the same would be to say symbols.

Geertz's theoretical position derives from the work of Mead and Kardiner, the existentialist philosophers, symbolists such as Cassirer and Langer, as well as more generally on Weber and what is generally known as the «verstehen» approach. It is also evident that as a student of Parsons, Geertz is concerned with fusing all these influences in order to «humanize» a Grand Theory that has often proved difficult to use in empirical research. Geertz's work can be seen as an attempt to forge a middle ground between that positivism which even denies experience and the formalism that abstracts so far as to divorce itself from reality. And thus, with Langer, we find him directing anthropology's attentions towards the concept of meaning, manifested in symbols, as «the dominant philosophical concept of our time». Symbols and meaning, he argues, are well worth our somewhat belated interest.

It is the phenomenological status that Geertz attributes to religious symbolizing that is so well brought out and explained in his study of Javanese religion. Religion here has its motivating force conceived to lie in the «fidelity with which it expresses the fundamental nature of reality». Action, and the interpretation of action, world-view and ethos, find common unity of expression in the sum of general meanings existent in, and constitutive of, a considered culture. In the every-day world of behavior one only finds the manifestation, the continual working-out, and the aspired-to reflection of inner states of being.

The «*SLAMETAN*» in its «*ABANGAM*» form, is a «rude» protege of the refined «phenomenology of feeling» epitomized in the «*WAJANG*», the «*PRIJAJI*» shadow play which merges the aesthetic with the moral, the artistic with the religious (GEERTZ 1958). But the continuity and indifferenciability of the ideal and the actual are bound together in the character of «*SEMEAR*». The latter, the «lowest» and most earthy personage of the «*WAJANG*», recalls the link with the village life in his representation of the exigencies of real life as opposed to the idealistic view suscribed by the «*PRIJAJIS*». The realities of human ineptitude which the «*SLAMETAN*» mitigates but cannot transcend are also in «*SEMAR*».

As Geertz notes when he makes a comparison of the «*WAJANG*» with Shakespearian drama, both «*Semar*» and Falstaff provide a rather general criticism, of the very values the dramas in which they are included affirm. They furnish a reminder that, despite over-proud assertions to the contrary, no completely adequate human world-view is possible; and that behind all the pretense to absolute and ultimate knowledge, the sense for the irrationality of human life ... does remain» (GEERTZ 1966).

And this is precisely why, of course, symbols cannot escape their human and natural referents. Symbols, like scientific knowledge, can be bent to the most devious human doctrines. Looking at the contemporary world it is not overstating the case to point out the destructiveness as well as the constructive powers of the symbol. The crises in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf are particularly exemplary of the relevance of our analysis of sacred symbols. But secular symbols are equally, if not more so, precipitants of conflicts between individuals and nations. The present antagonisms within the United States and Canada are largely to be understood as fervent disagreements over concepts such as «freedom», «liberty», «justice», «equality» and the like. If humans rose from their primordial, muddy beginnings through the ability to symbolize, it may yet prove to be a specialization the limita-

tions of which far may well surpass those of any physiological «cul-de-sac» that humans might possibly have entered. Symbols could conceivably constitute both the human species' salvation and at the same time they could also be its doom.

In studies of religion, anthropology has rarely considered belief systems as expressive, in Tillich's phrase, of «ultimate concerns». Such research is manifested most often in the works of French scholars. Griaule, Deiterlen, and Dumont, in Africa and Asia, have made great advances in demonstrating cosmologies and philosophies as being no simple reflection of social structures. Nevertheless, such findings tend to portray myths and beliefs as autonomous and often constitutive of social structure. Such a position is as much to be faulted as that of the Radcliffe-Brown, structuralist variety. The fact that Lévi-Strauss finds to credit in the work of Radcliffe-Brown suggests that the two approaches (British and French) are convergent and complementary. Both give greater attention to one dimension of human life at the expense of the other.

It is hoped that this paper has brought out the merits of an approach which avoids taking up a polar position in this respect. Geertz's awareness of the pitfalls involved in not recognizing the mutual relations of the actual and the normative is well exemplified in his refusal to accept the subjectivism inherent in a phenomenological analysis of religion. Transcendental phenomenology, in the Husserlian mode, does tend to «place the stress on a supposed inner state of the actor rather than on a certain sort of relation — a symbolically mediated one — between an actor and his situation» (GEERTZ 1966). For symbols are the link between the constituted and the constitutive, the model «of» (what is) and the model «for» (what could be), and they shape social life as forcibly as DNA shapes organic functioning. The comparison of gene and symbol is, indeed, as Geertz states, «more than a strained analogy» (GEERTZ 1966).

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